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Protest Policing from London to Paramakudi

Citation for published version:

Gorringer, H 2014, *Protest Policing from London to Paramakudi: From Containment to Dialogue in the UK*. <http://routesblog.com/>. <<http://routesblog.com/2014/09/16/protest-policing-from-london-to-paramakudi-from-containment-to-dialogue-in-the-uk/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Routes

Debate Dissent Deliver

Protest Policing from London to Paramakudi: From Containment to Dialogue in the UK

Posted on September 16, 2014 by Routes



On 1 April 2009, as world leaders gathered for the G20 summit in London, a man was caught up in a standoff between protesters and police. Trying to get home he sought to pass through police lines on a couple of occasions and was forcefully repulsed. One of the officers struck him from behind with a baton and pushed him to the ground in the process. Shortly afterwards, Ian Tomlinson collapsed and, having received emergency attention, died en route to hospital. Initially reports suggested that Mr Tomlinson had died of natural causes, but as video evidence of the assault by a police officer emerged there was a call for an inquiry and Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary called for a national overhaul of protest policing.

PC Harwood, the officer responsible for striking Mr Tomlinson was tried and, though he was acquitted of manslaughter, was found guilty of 'gross misconduct and sacked from the Metropolitan Police Service (Walker 2012). More generally, the episode prompted intense soul-searching with the UK police forces and led to a series of investigations focused on how the police managed protest events. Subsequent reports by the House of Commons Home Affairs

Committee (2009) and by Her Majesty's Chief Inspectorate of Constabulary (2009), and documentary programmes – notably Channel 4's *Dispatches* programme, 'Ready for a Riot'-cast a critical spotlight onto the tactics used in the management of public order and raised questions regarding the training and preparation of police officers for such events.

The Chief Inspector of Constabulary's (HMCIC, 2009) review of public order policing critiqued existing methods of crowd control and called for a new approach. It recognised that police crowd control interventions can aggravate potential conflict if they appear unreasonable and/or indiscriminate to those in attendance. In so doing, this report drew on two areas of academic research. The first is the Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM), which offers a theoretical basis for understanding crowd dynamics (Reicher et al. 2004). It shows how certain forms of police public order tactics unify crowd opposition and contribute to an escalation of conflict. The second body of research (Stott and Gorringer 2013) relates to Scandinavian police practices of dialogue and engagement as means of facilitating protestor objectives and enhancing mutual sympathy and understanding. Both areas of work advocate the need for flexible, reflexive and pre-emptive and/or preventative public order policing.

The guidelines emphasised in new training manuals revolve around the need to respect the human rights to protest and assembly and are based on the four principles of education, facilitation, communication and differentiation (Reicher et al. 2004). Reicher and colleagues stress that police should seek to identify and meet the legitimate aims of crowd members; and that, if the police consider it necessary to impose unwanted limitations, they should do their best to provide alternative means for achieving the crowd's objectives:

Indeed, it is at the point where violence is beginning to break out and where the temptation to clamp down is at its strongest that facilitation becomes most important. It is at this point that a clear indication that the police are supporting collective aims (and that violence endangers them) can make the difference between escalation and de-escalation. Of course, for this to happen, it is necessary not only that the police are trying to facilitate crowd aims, but also that crowd members see them as doing so. (2004: 567)

The emphasis throughout is on the need to avoid violent confrontations and preserve the legitimacy of the police as guardians of law and order. Following the G20 protests research into policing suggests that people comply and co-operate with the police when they perceive them as legitimate not just when they pose a deterrent threat. Conversely where people see the police as operating according to different values and not abiding by the rules, then deference towards and co-operation with the police breaks down (Bradford, Jackson and Hough 2013).

'Traumatic events' as della Porta notes, 'can stimulate learning processes' (in D. Waddington 2007: 32), and the response of the British police to a protest related death in 2009 suggests that lessons are being learned and new methods of conflict resolution are being introduced. Clearly this is not a linear, or completely smooth process. Police responses to student demonstrators in 2010 suggested that there was a retreat from the recommendations of the HMIC reports (Stott, Gorringer and Rosie 2010), and renewed hostilities in late 2013 show that lessons have not necessarily been learned (Gorringer and Rosie 2013). The issue here, though, is one of accountability, responsibility and legitimacy and the attempt – at least – by police in the UK to condemn and seek to address failing in their practices. As an academic who conducts research in both India and the UK, the contrast between police reactions in the UK and the recently released Justice Sampath Commission findings (Dorairaj 2013) into police firing in Paramakudi could not be starker.

Condoning Police Excess?

Where the death of one person at the hands of a 'rogue' officer occasioned multiple changes to protest policing and a criminal trial in the UK, the police officers who fired into a crowd and severely beat up protestors after they had been arrested – killing seven people – in Paramakudi were exonerated by the Chief Minister almost before the smoke had cleared (Jaishankar & Karthikeyan 2011). The Sampath Commission duly echoed this position arguing that the police had acted in self-defence, but it did call the actions of police in beating arrestees 'disgraceful and at variance with the prescription of the Police Standing Orders' (Dorairaj 2013). Even this criticism was unacceptable to the state government which rejected these 'disparaging remarks'.

It is worth recalling the events of 11 September 2011. Dalits, primarily but not exclusively from the Pallar caste, travelled in numbers to Paramakudi for the annual celebration – or *guru puja* – of Immanuel Sekaran. Sekaran was an anti-caste activist who led campaigns for dignity and rights in the 1950s before his murder in 1957. Over the past two decades Dalits have started marking his anniversary in much the same manner as Ambedkar jeyanthi is marked elsewhere. Significantly, however, this is an area of historic caste tensions and the iconography attending this event emulates the processions and festivities surrounding the birth anniversary of Muthuramalinga Thevar the pre-eminent Thevar leader who was a contemporary of Immanuel Sekaran and implicated by many in his murder. The Thevars are dominant castes in the area and have seen the annual commemoration of Immanuel Sekaran as an affront.

Caste tensions are common around the memorial as a consequence and so there is always a heavy police presence. In 2011, caste clashes running up to the *guru puja* saw Pallars and Thevars trading insults and witnessed the death of the 16-year old Pallar youth Palanikumar of Pacheri village. He was accused of insulting Muthuramalinga Thevar with graffiti – highlighting the caste based polarisation and discourses of pride and honour that characterise caste relations in the area (Geetha 2011, Parthasarathi 2011). In the face of such tension the police were understandably anxious to avoid further caste clashes, but they also determined to prevent the popular and radical Pallar or Devendra Kula leader John Pandian from making his way to the memorial. Though the justification for his preventative arrest was the fear that his speeches might instigate violence, this action clearly diminished the legitimacy of police actions in the eyes of Dalit participants.

Where the police could have gained trust and legitimacy by emphasising that they were there to protect and facilitate Dalit protestors, they created animosity instead. Pandian's supporters were infuriated by the move and gave vent to their anger by sitting down and blocking the roads. The police ordered them to disperse. At this juncture at least two respected Dalit leaders – Chandra Bose of the *Tiyagi Immanuel Peravai* (Martyr Immanuel Front) and Thavamani of the *Tamil Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam* (Tamil People's Progressive Federation, John Pandian's party) contacted the police and offered to intercede. In their study of crowd situations, the social psychologist Stephen Reicher and colleagues (2004) stress the importance of communicating to crowds through trusted intermediaries. These offers, however, were rejected (Geetha 2011; People's Watch 2011). Instead, a lathi charge was ordered and closely followed by police firing. In the process, police action was entirely indiscriminate and affected onlookers as well as those taking part in the memorial (Interviews with activists, 2012; People's Watch 2011).

In this context, the assertion, by the Sampath Commission, that the police actions were 'absolutely warranted to maintain peace and restore normalcy' (Dorairaj 2013) have prompted a wave of protests by human rights and Dalit groups. From media and independent reports it

seems clear that any unrest on the part of Dalits was a direct response to police interventions. In the face of such contradictions a number of authors have suggested that the government were seeking to appease a dominant caste vote-bank and send out a warning to the Pallar community about their increasing assertion (Geetha 2011, Parthasarathi 2011). The AIADMK has historically sought to woo the Thevar vote-bank (Pandian 2000), though whether that was the case here is unclear. In 2012, by contrast, there was violence by Pallars against Thevars that led the dominant caste groups to feel abandoned and victimised by the police (Interviews 2012).

Towards Democratic Policing?

In this paper, rather than focus on the caste bias or otherwise of the police I wish to counterpose the response by police in London with the Sampath report on Paramakudi to ask questions about protest policing more generally. The violence against Thevars in 2012, and the police operations in 2013 that resulted in a trouble free celebration of *guru pujas* for both Immanuel Sekaran and Muthuramalinga Thevar suggest that good and bad policing affects all communities. Loader (1997: 15) argues that the police are 'one of the principal ways in which the ... nation and its qualities are represented'. Where the police are seen as distant and unaccountable, however, as Ellison and Smyth (2000: 152) note by reference to Northern Ireland, then 'policing can promote feelings of belonging and security for some', but 'it can also deny recognition to others'.

It was a recognition of the potentially divisive nature of public perceptions of the police that led Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary to overhaul policing in the wake of the London G20. Whilst this does not make the UK police paragons of virtue – as seen in clashes with students and the recent revelations about ethically disgraceful covert operations (Lewis and Evans 2013) – it does, at the least, retain the sense of a police force that can be held to account. It is the Tamil Nadu government's reluctance to act on even the minimal criticisms voiced by the Sampath Commission that is most troubling in this regard. Even if we accept the report's conclusion that the police acted in self-defence (which is contradicted by numerous independent reports: People's Watch 2011), the failure to hold officers to account for blatant breaches of their own codes of conduct can only serve to erode the trust and legitimacy upon which democratic policing depends. Shorn of these pillars, the police are condemned to maintain order on the basis of fear and force, and that is no recipe for democratic policing.

This post was written by Hugo Gorringe.

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tagged with Featured, G20, London, Paramakudi, PoliceViolence, Protest, Violence

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